

**Remarks Given by
Lt. Governor Becky Skillman
National Homeless Persons Memorial Day
December 21st, 2007, Indianapolis, IN**

Across the nation today, thousands of Americans are gathered to remember. We are gathered to remember the lives that were lost to homelessness. This year, there were Hoosiers who died from exposure, hunger and poverty. All conditions associated with homelessness. We are here today to remember them. They were members of our community.

Among our homeless population in Indianapolis and across our state are dads, single moms and children, veterans who have sacrificed so that we may live in freedom, ex offenders who have paid their debt to society and seek a new beginning, your former neighbors who have fallen on hard times and don't know where to turn. They remind us that every Hoosier needs access to safe, decent and affordable housing.

As Chair of the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority Board, I understand the importance of caring for our most vulnerable neighbors—especially those without that basic necessity of life—shelter. My Aunt Rebekah, operated the only shelter and community kitchen in my hometown in southern Indiana. And of course, I came to know some of the individuals and families who sought assistance there. Many of our friends in need live in urban areas, but housing issues are just as great in our rural areas where unemployment is often very high.

Over the past two years, as I have traveled all across our state, I often have the opportunity to visit shelters and interact with those in need of services. From Evansville, to Indianapolis, to Gary and a number of smaller communities in between, I have been touched and inspired by Hoosiers who are willing to share their life's story with me.

Like my friend Luwanna – who lived a very hard life of abuse, drugs and homelessness with her children. If it weren't for Hoosiers caring for Hoosiers, Luwanna would not be in the prosperous, healthy place she is today. Thanks to a helping hand from a caring neighbor, she and her children are no longer homeless. She is working and looking forward to a comfortable future.

Her story of hope and promise make it even more heartbreaking that we didn't reach some Hoosiers in time to provide that hope for the future.

This day of remembrance began 16 years ago in our country. Today, we join many other cities as we focus on our homeless neighbors among us. We celebrate their lives and mourn their deaths. As we remember those lives lost, I want to remind you that the best means we have of honoring these men and women is to recommit ourselves to ending homelessness. All too often, life on the streets leads to death on the streets.

We honor these men and women by recognizing that homelessness is a chronic and pervasive in our nation. In Indianapolis, we are blessed to have the focus and energy of CHIP (the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention). CHIP reminds us that a truly “World Class City” is one that cares for its most vulnerable neighbors, and cares for them consistently.

We know the problem, and we are working toward a solution. I am proud that Indianapolis is one of a select group of cities nationally that can boast a “10-Year Plan” to end homelessness.

State government also has a detailed plan to end homelessness. Indiana’s 10-year plan outlines effective strategies for empowering the service provider community, and for providing resources in a more efficient and streamlined manner – to be able to care for as many Hoosiers as possible. I’m proud of the progress we’ve been able to make in the first three years since the plan was implemented. There is now a sustainable funding source for the Indiana Affordable Housing and Community Development Fund. That money will directly benefit our state’s most pressing housing needs.

We’ve also started the SOAR program – Social Security, Outreach, Access and Recovery training. This program helps states and communities access Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income for homeless people with mental illnesses or substance use disorders. So far, SOAR has been successful enough to access benefits for 80% of the homeless clients it serves. That’s a huge step in the right direction.

If we continue to focus on meeting the needs of all of our neighbors, we will honor the memories of those who are not with us today.

Our mission in state government is to provide all Hoosiers with opportunities to find safe, decent and affordable housing. By doing that, we ARE strengthening our communities. By strengthening our communities, we ARE building our future.

(SLOW)

The Book of Hebrews calls us to consider how we can “spur one another on to love and good works.” (Heb. 10:24). That is exactly what we are doing here today. We have gathered together to call attention to a problem that will require the love of many and the good works of us all to solve.

I hope that you have been encouraged to persevere if you are already involved in helping the homeless. I hope you have been encouraged to get involved if you are looking for a way to help. No matter what, I hope you will leave here today changed by this memorial service.

In the coming year, let us all remember the lives lost to homelessness. Let’s make a commitment to join together to meet the needs of those who have no place to call home.

Thank you.